

The Refugee Crisis in Djibouti and the Role of the United Nations

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Abstract: This article studies the refugee crisis in Djibouti, their struggles and the role of the United Nations and its refugee agency UNHCR play. Looking back at how the refugee crisis in Europe after WWI and WWII was solved by the international organizations reveals that refugee crisis can be solved. The Eastern African and Yemen civil wars, political imprisonment and persecutions, which are all the causes of the refugees in the region, are also discussed in this work. The number of refugees in Djibouti is very tiny comparing to the number of displaced persons worldwide but it is better to keep in mind that Djibouti is a very small country with only 900,000 population. This work will also look in to the situation of the refugees in the country and try to examine their shelters that they live in, the food ratio that they receive from WFP, the education of the refugee children and how they are treated by the organizations and the people of the country and the government of Djibouti.

Keywords: *Crisis, Djibouti, Refugee, United Nations, Refugee Camps.*

Date of Submission: 29-11-2018

Date of acceptance: 12-12-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of the displaced persons worldwide by the minute shows the need of the United Nations and its refugee agency UNHCR more than ever. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), announced that there are 68.5 million displaced persons and 25.4 million refugees worldwide.¹ This growing number of displaced persons and refugees shows that the policies and work of the UN and its refugee agency UNHCR is failing. War, conflict, and fear of persecution are driving these people out of their homes.

The refugee crisis in Djibouti will be deeply discussed in this work. Djibouti is a very small and sunny country in the Horn of Africa. Its population is 900,000 and shares borders with Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and very close to Yemen by sea. For the past three decades, people from these countries have been fleeing from wars, civil wars and persecutions from their own governments. At the moment, the country is hosting 26,915 refugees from all over its neighboring countries including Yemen². The first refugee camp in Djibouti was opened in 1991 at Ali Addeh and then was followed by Holl-Holl camp and finally Markazi camp. The struggles and problems of these refugees in Djibouti and the role of the United Nations and its refugee agencies play will be discussed in this study. This article asks the questions like ‘if the United Nations and its refugee agency UNHCR are serious about their work and helping the refugees in Djibouti’. As methodology, research is based on field observation, survey and interview.

II. REFUGEE

The term ‘Refugee’ has been defined at the 1951 Geneva Convention’s Article 1 as “A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.³

The convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees is the legal framework for the UNHCR. “The Convention, which entered into force in 1954, is by far the most widely ratified refugee treaty, and remains

¹ UNHCR (2018). “Figures at a Glance”, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

² Panaligan, V. J. (2018). “Djibouti Fact Sheet”, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Djibouti%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20January%202018%20%28EN%29.pdf>

³ UNHCR (2010). “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”, <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.pdf>

central also to the protection activities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees”.⁴ This internationally accepted treaty changed the way of how the refugees are being treated. This 1951 Geneva Convention gave both the refugees and the host states mutual rights and responsibilities. When refugees cross in to another country’s borders for protection, they are given asylum seeker status at first and are expected to prove their cases according to the conditions of the Convention in order to get the refugee status.

After asylum seekers are accepted and given the refugee status, their lives become better and they are given housing, work permits and education, however, hosting countries’ policies towards refugees are not always the same. Furthermore, many countries that are member to the Convention and its Protocol do not give asylum seekers the refugee status and ask them to leave. The state should recognize asylum seekers as refugees at first and then they can benefit from the refugee status but the question is, who will protect those the state do not recognize them as refugees and are in danger of prosecution.

Fear is the main factor for those refugees who are fleeing from their homes are becoming refugees in the first place, and nowadays it’s not easy for refugees to prove their ‘well-founded fear of persecution’ to the authorities. According to Koser’s book, there are debates about the age of the Convention and how it does not relate to the realities of the modern world. Koser points out how Convention was adequate then, and how the realities on the ground have changed since and the way it no longer relates to the realities of refugees in the modern world. Critics of the 1951 Geneva Convention argue that in those days it was focusing on those who were persecuted by states. Hence, the purpose behind writing the Convention was to protect those who were fleeing from persecution by the Nazi regime but later on its purpose had changed and was used for political reasons and those who were fleeing from Communism during the Cold War.⁵ Nowadays, most of the refugees are not fleeing from state persecution or a specific political persecution but from many other insecurities and fears that the Convention does not cover.

This definition of refugee by the Convention to ‘well-founded fear’ of persecution does not define most of the new refugees in the world now. Shacknove (1985, p, 276) pointed out that this definition might have been accurate in those days but persecution is not the only thing that can damage the bond between a state and its citizen, and in that case, the definition must include the broader ways in which it can get damaged.⁶ Andrew E. Shacknove’s own definition is that of “persons whose basic needs are unprotected by their country of origin, who have no remaining recourse other than to seek international restitution of their needs, and who are so situated that international assistance is possible”.⁷

During the First and Second World Wars up until the Cold War, wars were fought between two states or more. However, things have changed in the 21st century, and besides the US invasion in Afghanistan and Iraq, most of the new refugees are fleeing from conflicts that are fought inside states and most of the time it happens because of either ethnicity or religion lines. Koser ‘professional armies’ do not fight each other most of the conflicts nowadays, but by ‘militias or mercenary groups’.⁸ Those who become victims in these conflicts and suffer the most are the civilians.

III. EASTERN AFRICAN AND YEMENI CONFLICTS AND REFUGEE CRISES

There are civil wars, terrorism, and chaos that are happening in Africa and the area that is affected the most is the Eastern African countries. In 1991 after the collapse of the Somali state, many problems have emerged and caused many hardships in the lives of the Somali people. Somali military had been one of the strongest in Africa before the Somali state collapsed in 1991. When the western colonization came to Somalia, they divided the Somali nation in to five different parts and gave Ethiopia the Ogaden in the west and in the Southwestern to Kenya (known as the Northern Frontier District) before they left. “During the colonial period (approximately 1891 to 1960), the Somalis were separated into five mini-Somalilands: British Somaliland (north central); French Somaliland (east and southeast); Italian Somaliland (south); Ethiopian Somaliland (the Ogaden); and, what came to be called the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya”.⁹

French Somaliland (Djibouti) did not unit with the British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland in 1960 because French Somaliland (Djibouti) got its independence from France in 1977, almost 17 years after the other

⁴ Goodwin-Gill, G. S. (2008). “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”, http://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/prsr/prsr_e.pdf

⁵ Koser, K. (2007). “International Migration: A Very Short Introduction”. New York, Oxford University Press Inc. p.71, <https://lms.hse.ru/content/lessons/35035/Koser%20International%20Migration.pdf>

⁶ Shacknove, A. E. (1985). “Who is a Refugee?”. The University of Chicago Press. Ethics, Vol. 95 No. 2, p.276, [http://www.law.lu.se/WEBUK.nsf/\(MenuItemById\)/JAMR27material/\\$FILE/Shacknove.pdf](http://www.law.lu.se/WEBUK.nsf/(MenuItemById)/JAMR27material/$FILE/Shacknove.pdf)

⁷ Shacknove, p.277

⁸ Koser, p.77

⁹ Metz, H. C. (1992). “Somalia: History, A Country Study, Washington, GPO for the Library of Congress, <http://countrystudies.us/somalia/2.htm>

two. The Ogaden and the NFD regions are still under the occupation of the Ethiopians and Kenyans according to Somalis. The North and the South of Somalia did not have a historical interaction between them before their independence in 1960 which even their colonial experiences were different, but because of their ethnicity, language, culture and religion, decided to unit.¹⁰

In April 1960, representatives of the two regions held talks and agreed to work towards a merge...without any serious negotiations about important political and economic issues...the failure to negotiate any preconditions and to foresee potential conflict of interest would in time come to haunt the North.¹¹

Somali leaders were mostly educated in the West and were 'favorably disposed towards the Western democracies' and later on would not the amount of support they were expecting for building and improving their military and because of this, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Somalia came about.¹² Later after its independence, Somalia decided to develop '20,000 man army' and the reason being it's neighbors and enemy Ethiopia and Kenya. Somalia looked help support from the USA, however the United States offered 5,000 man army which is not even half of what Somalia wanted and suggested that it will be enough for 'Mogadishu's internal security'.¹³ After Somalia's disappointment from the United States and the West, in 1961, they seek help from the Soviet Union and begun have a close relationship with them and got better arms deals then they were getting from the West and continued until 1977.

Somalia accepted \$30 million military aid from the Soviet Union In 1963 which they announced to the world in that year but this announcement and relationship with the Soviet Union angered the west which they later on offered Somalia packages for arms. However, Somalia refused to accept the deal because of the better offers they were receiving from the Soviet Union.¹⁴ The relationship between Somalia and Soviet Union broke down in 1977 after Fidel Castro's Cuba and the Soviet Union become allies with Ethiopia whom Somalia was in a war with at that time because of the Ogaden region.

The same year, United States which was in an agreement and an ally of Ethiopia was told to leave the country and later on Ethiopia allied with the Soviet Union and ended up embracing socialism. In return, Soviet Union provided weapons to Ethiopia and brought 1,500 troops from Cuba to fight alongside the Ethiopians in their war against Somalia. Elisabeth Kigen's Master dissertation in 2004, which was titled "The Impact of the Cold War on the Ethiopia-Somalia Relations in, 1960-1990", explains the causes of the conflicts in the horn of Africa in a detailed way. Kigen, explains how the region has been under contention since 1885 from the great powers.¹⁵ In her work, she continues to explain how the region had become a playground for the Soviet Union and the US for their Cold War strategies and how they militarized the region for their own selfish interest and how the problems they created in the region can still be seen. Between the years of 1960-1990, they both took advantage of the feud that was between these two neighboring countries and militarized the region. Until to this day, those weapons that the competing powers brought to the region are used for the conflicts in the region. The Cold war affected directly or indirectly in every continent in the world, but the region it affected the most and cannot still cope from it is Africa.

When the African countries were gaining their independence, the Cold War was on its peak. Without the experience of ruling themselves, these newly born countries turn to the two superpowers at that time (Soviet Union and USA) for political advice and aid which then they seized the opportunity and exploited those countries for their own selfish.¹⁶ "Because most African countries gained their independence during the height of Cold War tensions, the superpowers, i.e. the Soviet Union and the United States, dictated the terms of their freedom. The African people were robbed of the opportunity to design their own governments and systems".¹⁷

¹⁰ The Africa Watch Committee (1990). "Somalia, a Government at War with its Own People": Testimonies about the Killings and the Conflict of the North, p.13,

https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/somalia_1990.pdf

¹¹ The Africa Watch Committee, p.13

¹² Metz, H. C. (1992b). Somalia: Foreign Relations 1960-69, *A Country Study*, Washington, GPO for the Library of Congress, <http://countrystudies.us/somalia/17.htm>

¹³ Countrydata (1992). Somalia: Foreign Military Assistance. Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-12055.html>

¹⁴ Kigen, E. C. (2004). The Impact of the Cold War on the Ethiopia-Somalia Relations, 1960-1990. (Master Thesis), University of Nairobi, pp.18-19,

http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/53117/Kigen_The%20impact%20of%20the%20cold%20war%20on%20the%20Ethiopia-Somalia%20relations,%201960-1990.pdf?sequence=2

¹⁵ Kigen, p.43

¹⁶ Kigen, p.57

¹⁷ Kigen, p.57

Trying to add more clients in to their list while competing against each other, than superpowers militarized the region and this action did not go well for the whole region.

When Somalia withdraws its military from Ethiopia after the 1977 war, both countries had armed rebel groups against each other. The Somali National Movement (SNM), which was an 'Isaak' rebel group and United Somali Congress (USC) a 'Hawiye' rebel group were established and started fighting against the Somali government among other rebel groups. Ethiopia was supporting these rebel groups against Somalia which and were operating launching attacks from Ethiopia. On the hand, the same way Ethiopia was supporting the rebel groups against the Somali government, Somalia was also supporting the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) rebels.

General Mohamed Siad Barre overthrew the elected Somali government in 1969 only nine years after the unification of the British Somaliland and the Italian Somalia, barre who was from the Italian Somalia used the coup for both the police and army together.¹⁸ The former British Somalilanders who were not happy with how things were going and they had been treated for the first few years in to the marriage, had received and faced more harsher treatments like injustice, discrimination, imprisonment and execution from Siad Barre's regime.

In 1988, the two dictators Barre of Somalia and Meriam of Ethiopia had agreed not to support rebel groups against each other and banned rebel groups to operate in their countries which this move had changed the situation in Somalia dramatically. After the Somali Salvation Democratic Fron's (SSDF) rebel bases were closed by Meriam, the Somali National Movement realized that they are next and entered Somalia without a good preparation for war and came up with a suicidal mission.¹⁹ Siad Barre regime started shelling the British Somaliland cities in response to the SNM attacks, he kept bombing and killing civilians indiscriminately and those who survived the bombings were displaced.²⁰

While SNM rebels were still fighting with government troops inside Somalia, General Mohamed Farah Aided who was the leader of the United Somali Congress (USC) had reached an agreement with the SNM leaders in Ethiopia. General Aided, who is from Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia, took the war to Barre inside the capital. Unfortunately, Siad Barre whose human rights record was very poor, turn his weapons to the Hawiye civilians in retaliation.

The Somali government led by Siad Barre collapsed in 1991 after it received many pressures from the international community politically and economically and plus the widespread guerrilla warfare that was going on in many parts of the country.²¹ Many people had been forced out from their homes by the Barre regime and seek shelter and protection from the neighboring countries. Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Yemen were the nearest neighboring countries that the Somali refugees could reach. After the Barre regime started targeting and massacring the Isaak clan in the Northern Somalia in 1988, the civilians started fleeing to Djibouti and Ethiopia. Furthermore, when the war started in South Somalia later on, the rest of the country blanch in to chaos and the rest of the population fled to Kenya and Yemen.

Ethiopia, which is a neighbor and at the same time was a sworn enemy of Somalia had become a safe haven for the Somali refugees. In 1988 until present day, Ethiopia hosted close to 630,000 Somali refugees.²² Out of the 630,000 Somali refugees that fled to Ethiopia, the number of refugees that fled from Northern of Somalia was more than 300,000. In 1991 after the war ended in the Northern part of Somalia, refugees had returned to Northern Somalia (Somaliland) voluntarily.²³

The Ethiopian Administration for Refugee Affairs (ARA) had been running the daily operations of the camps within Ethiopia. In 1989, the lives of the refugees in the camps became very difficult because of shortage of water, food and lake of security at night time when most of the camp workers leave at night, "Some refugees had to wait as long as two months to obtain ration cards... There was such a shortage of coal that people had to

¹⁸ Kigen, p.40

¹⁹ Baumann, R. F. et. al (2004). *My Clan against the World: US and Coalition Forces in Somalia, 1992-1994*. Kansas, CSI Press, pp.15-16
https://books.google.com.tr/books?id=n71gKrQhAbMC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

²⁰ Kigen, p.99

²¹ Kigen, p.99

²² Moret, J. et. al (2006). *The Path of Somali Refugees into Exile: A Comparative Analysis of Secondary Movements and Policy Responses*. Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies, p.33
<http://www.unhcr.org/50aa0d6f9.pdf>

²³ Moret, p.33

walk three hours to fetch it... malaria, jaundice, meningitis and diarrhea have taken heavy toll.... the severe shortage of water, and the absence of sanitary facilities have created a public health disaster”.²⁴

Those who were seeking protection, the security in the camps had become another problem. At nighttime, many refugees were armed, and as soon as the foreign camp workers leave which they were not allowed to spend the night inside the camps by the Ethiopian authorities, the level of violence in the camps were getting very high. There was even times when the foreign health workers would have another choice but to suspend their work in the camps because they had been robbed three times at a gunpoint while on their way to the camps.

Kenya, which was another neighbor and enemy of Somalia had become another safe haven for the Somali refugees and grows to become the country that hosts the most Somali Refugees. The Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya was intended to house 90,000 refugees and today it is a home to 463,000 refugees, which the third refugee generations are up to 10,000, keeping in mind that even their parents were born in Dadaab Camp.²⁵ Historically, Somali people have always been very proud people, even during the colonial days, the colonial countries were not able to make the Somali people do things that they see as degrading to them and would not think about a day they would ask protection from one of their enemies, be their guests and living in the biggest refugee camp in the world. Dadaab refugee camp was opened between 1991-1992 for the Somali refugees fleeing from the civil war. Dadaab camp started with three separate refugee camps and later on was added to the fourth one because of the 2011 drought in Somalia.²⁶

“In 2013, Kenya, Somalia and UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement to help Somali refugees from Dadaab begin voluntarily returning home to nine designated areas in South Central regions and in Puntland and Somaliland that are deemed relatively safe. More than 14,000 have returned so far and thousands more have signed up to leave”.²⁷ However, as mentioned earlier, inside the Kenyan camps, there are third generation refugees and even if these people go back to the country that their grandparents called home, life might be harder for them because there are no houses and jobs waiting for them their and on top of that, security will be another issue for them.

The Kenyan government announced that it would close down Dadaab camp, which is the biggest and oldest refugee camp in the world. This was announced in May 2016 and the Kenyan government’s excuse was because of security reasons. The Somali terrorist group ‘Al-Shabaab’ has been targeting and doing terrorist activities inside Kenya for the past few years and said that they are targeting Kenya because of their military presence in Somalia. The Dadaab refugee camp has been accused of being a training ground and a hideout place for Al-Shabaab by the Kenyan government and said it will close the camp and send the refugees back to Somalia.²⁸ However, Kenya’s High Court declared the government’s claims to be null and void after the Kenyan government failed to produce any evidence of its claims. After the announcement of the Kenyan government, some refugees who were in the camps voluntarily returned to Somalia. In February 2017 according to UNHCR, 260,923 refugees and asylum seekers have been living in the Dadaab camps, Somalis are 95.5% of the refugees in Dadaab camp in Kenya.²⁹

Djibouti, which is the only kin state of Somalia also become another country were many Somali refugees find shelter and protection. Djibouti got its independence in 1977 from France and did not unite with Somalia. Djibouti decided to become an independent country instead of joining the rest of Somalia and learned lessons from the British Somaliland’s mistake whom who gave their freedom away for nothing and did not want to suffer the same faith like them.

Djibouti is a signatory the refugee Convention and its Protocol and during the civil war in Somalia, many civilians from the Northern part of Somalia and were fleeing from Siad Barre’s persecution seek protection from Djibouti. At that time, there were 15,000 registered Ethiopian refugees in the country and

²⁴ The Africa Watch Committee, p.201

²⁵ UNHCR (2012). Dadaab-World’s biggest refugee camp 20 years old.

<http://www.unhcr.org/news/makingdifference/2012/2/4f439dbb9/dadaab-worlds-biggest-refugee-camp-20-years-old.html>

²⁶ UNHCR, (2012)

²⁷ Fleming, M. and Hughes, D. (2016). In Kenya, UNHCR Chief Assured Return of Refugees will not Contravene International Obligations. <http://www.unhcr.org/ke/1154-in-kenya-unhcr-chief-assured-return-of-refugees-will-not-contravene-international-obligations.html>

²⁸ DW (2017). Kenyan High Court overrules government on Dadaab refugee camp closure.

<http://www.dw.com/en/kenyan-high-court-overrules-government-on-dadaab-refugee-camp-closure/a-37468097>

²⁹ UNHCR (2017b). UNHCR Kenya: Dadaab Refugee Camp Update, p.1,

https://igad.int/attachments/article/1513/FactSheet_Kenya.pdf

because of this; Djibouti was already working with the UNHCR, however Djibouti would not recognize the 30,000 Somali refugees that fled Bare's persecution and seek protection from Djibouti.³⁰

Different people come up with different theories on the reasons why Djibouti would not recognize the Northern Somali refugees and give them protection but none of them would make sense for those refugees who were deported and dead in hands of Bare regime. "The police routinely conduct sweeps of people thought to be illegal aliens, and some Somali refugees have been deported as a result. Africa Watch's October 1989 report indicates that many refugees may have perished during the forced repatriation in June of 125 people into an isolated area of Somalia"³¹ After pressure and many serious criticisms from the international human rights organizations, Djibouti 'appealed to the UNHCR to assist Somalis in 1989', the European Community (EC) donated \$114,000 to the refugees in Djibouti, however, UNHCR insisted that its role for finding solution will be difficult limited if the Somali refugees are not recognized and given refugee status.³²

In those years, the Djibouti government 'declared that permanent resettlement was not an option' in order to discourage and stop refugees coming to the country. It also 'declared that permanent resettlement was not an option', and in May 1989, had closed its borders with Somalia.³³ However, the Djibouti people's treatment towards the refugees had been different and better than the treatment of their government. Ali-Addeh, which is the first refugee camp in the country, was established in 1991. Somalia and Djibouti share the same language, religion and culture so there was no culture shock and language problem for the Somali refugees. The refugees reside in three different camps in Djibouti, which are Ali Addeh, Holl Holl and the Markazi. The majority of the first two camps are Somalis and then Ethiopians and Eritreans. The third and newest camp 'Merkezi', was established especially for the Yemeni refugees.

Ethiopia shares borders with Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan. It is the second most populated and at the same time the oldest country in the African Continent. After World War II, the US and Soviet had an interest in the Horn of African region. As mentioned earlier, Somalia and Ethiopia had always a bad blood between them because of the Somali region in Ethiopia (Ogaden) which Britain gave to Ethiopia.

As usual, the superpowers had not acted as mediators and solved the problem, but were after their own selfish interests. The US entered the Horn of Africa at first after it signed a 'treaty of friendship and economic relations' with Ethiopia in 1951 and then later on followed two other agreements in 1953, which "The first agreement was mutual defense assistance under which US agreed to assist Ethiopia with military equipment, training and communication facility at Asmara...and the second agreement was a twenty-five year US-Ethiopian military relationship"³⁴

The Ethiopian Emperor Haile Sellassie was facing many pressures from different national movement groups like Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and at the same time, the United States wanted to use Ethiopia for its cold war strategy (Kigen, 2004, p.48). In 1974, after over 40 years, Mengistu Haile Mariam overthrew Haile Sellassie. Ethiopia then embraced socialism, which this move made the US angry, However, in order the Soviet Union not to have any influence in Ethiopia, the US continued to give military aid to Ethiopia. The military aid that the US was giving to Ethiopia in order to prevent Soviet influence in the country was increasing every year.

The war between Somalia and Ethiopia in 1977 had produced alliance shifts in the Horn of Africa. The war might have ended in 1978, but the grudges that the two dictators were holding against each other and the hatred continued and both cost their positions in the end. They both supported and armed rebel groups against each other without realizing the outcome first. However, by the time they both realized that it was costing their seats, it was too late to stop it. Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was established in 1989 by the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) who merged with other ethnic rebel groups and caused Mengistu to flee to Zimbabwe.

Ethiopia has a central government that functions and is in control all of its territories and has never become a failed state like Somalia, but some of its people are just like Somalis who are refugees and seeking protection in many parts of the world. Currently, there is no civil war that is going on in Ethiopia, however, besides the famine and droughts, Ethiopian refugees are fleeing from tortures and persecutions that they face from their own government. After the disputed elections in 2005, the government increased the torture and

³⁰ Department of State (1990). *Country Reports on the Human Rights Practices for 1989*. US Government Printing Office, Washington, p.101

<https://ia802604.us.archive.org/16/items/countryreportson1989unit/countryreportson1989unit.pdf>

³¹ Department of State, p.101

³² Refworld (1991). *The Horn of Africa: Somalis in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya*. Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a80f30.html>

³³ Refworld, 1991

³⁴ Kigen, p.44

persecution against its political opponents “including under the country’s restrictive anti-terrorism law...police investigators have used various methods of torture and ill-treatment against those in their custody”.³⁵

Ethiopian refugees are also inside the Kenyan refugee camps, of course, the majority of the refugees are from Somalia and South Sudan, but still the number of Ethiopian refugees reaches up to 5.7%.³⁶ Just to get away from torture and persecution, Ethiopians fled to any direction that was possible for them. Some of them seek protection from Somaliland (North-Somalia), Yemen, Uganda, Djibouti and many different parts of the world.

All of Djibouti’s neighboring countries have been seeking protection in Djibouti since its independence in 1977. Currently, the number of asylum seekers and refugees from Ethiopia who are in Djibouti make up about more than 9,031.³⁷ These Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti share Ali-Addeh and Holl-Holl camps with the other Somali and Eritrean refugees. October 2016 until February 2017, 6,063 Ethiopian asylum seekers had entered Djibouti according to ONARS and UNHCR.³⁸ It is better to note that after this article was written, the situation in Ethiopia has changed for the better.

Many other countries in Africa are facing the same problems like Ethiopia and Somalia. The Eastern African countries are those that are affected the most. The superpowers and their Cold War games are to blame for most of it because they were only interested in controlling and have influence in the region. Furthermore, to win the support hearts of the dictators of these countries, the Soviet Union and the US militarized the region. Moreover, their policies and actions were never going to benefit neither the region nor these two countries. To this day, the region did not manage to come back from the Cold War games that had been played in the Horn of Africa. Most of the weapons that the superpowers brought to the region especially Somalia ended up in to the wrong hands after the collapse of the Somali government, and most of these refugees are the products of the Cold War.

Uniting and bringing Yemen under one rule has always been a very difficult. The northern and southern of the country had been under different systems and rules before the British left the north in 1967. The northern part had been part of the British Colony while the Southern part had been under Ottoman Empire. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Northern Yemen started ruling itself and had never been under the rule of other empires and did not experience the European colonial administrations. However, in 1839 after the British Empire captured the port of Aden, the southern Yemen become under the British colony.

Tensions have always been between the two parts of the country, if it is cultural, tribal and religion. “Culture and politics in the north are colored by over 1,000 years of Zaidi theocratic rule – a branch of Shi’ism found almost exclusively in Yemen. By contrast, the south was transformed by a century of British influence, beginning in the mid-19th century”.³⁹

Since Yemen’s unification, it has been facing many different problems. Among many problems, first there have been those who were feeling that they have been marginalized, second, Al-Qaida members who were running from Afghanistan and Iraq and using Yemen as a hideout, the Houthi movement, which is a Zaydi Shias of northern Yemen and finally, the Arab Spring that started in 2011 had been the last nail in to the coffin. After the Yemenis joined the Arab Spring and demanded President Salah to step down from power because of corruption and injustice, things did not go the way the protestors had in mind. The protest turned in to civil war, which took the lives of so many innocent lives and forced many people to become refugees.

In 2015 when the war between Houthi militia and the Yemeni government intensified, which the Iranian and the Saudi governments are both supporting militarily in different sides, the lives of the civilians in the country and their situation went from being bad to the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Refugees started fleeing Yemen in 2015, which most of them had seek protection in Djibouti. Markazi camp, which is four kilometers away from Obock city have been, located the Yemeni refugees in Djibouti. In summer, the Obock city’s temperature sometimes reaches up to 50 degrees with strong winds from May to July. With that amount of heat, it is very difficult to live without air-conditions or in that matter even fans.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch (2013). Ethiopia: Political Detainees Tortured.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/10/18/ethiopia-political-detainees-tortured>

³⁶ UNHCR (2017). Figures at a Glance, <http://www.unhcr.org/ke/figures-at-a-glance>

³⁷ Panaligan, p.1

³⁸ Reliefweb (2017). WFP Djibouti Country Brief, p.2

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Djibouti%20Country%20Brief%20February%202017%20OIM.pdf>

³⁹ ECFR (2015). Mapping the Yemen Conflict, <http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen>

IV. UNITED NATIONS AND REFUGEE ISSUE

“The United Nations is an international organization founded in 1945 after the Second World War by 51 countries committed to maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations and promoting social progress, better living standards and human rights”.⁴⁰ So far, it’s safe to say that not like the League of Nations who had failed to prevent a second major war, the United Nations has so far succeeded preventing a third war happening mainly in the west. Judging from that side, then it is safe to say that United Nations has achieved its goal and lived up to its expectations. However, judging the UN from the side of it’s work in Africa, than its safe to say it is not quite there yet.

Since its establishment in 1949, UNHCR has helped many refugees around the world and earned a great reputation for it. The purpose it was established was to find a solution for the millions of Europeans “in the aftermath of World War II”. It was given only three years to solve the refugee problem and then was supposed to be disbanded. Its mandate was repeatedly renewed because of the new refugee numbers that was rapidly increasing across the globe which in 2003, its mandate was made permanent by the UN General Assembly.⁴¹

According to UNHCR, “nearly 1 person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution”.⁴² That number is worrying and disturbing at the same time considering in this 21st century the 61 years UNHCR has been operating in Africa, its manpower and funds the refugee agency has. However, not finding durable solutions while the number of refugees keeps rising puts the work of the refugee agency in question. Either the strategy of the UNHCR is using is wrong or the agency is not honest about its work.

These days, even the refugees do not have faith in the UN refugee agency. It is understood that UNHCR is helping refugees but at the same time it’s understood that more refugee means more work for the refugee agency and its staff. Working with Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) like Kow Media Foundation (KMF) in Somaliland and Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Djibouti was somehow helpful in understanding the way NGOs and United Nations work. There were opportunities to observe how UN staff members work while working with these organizations.

Firstly, it is difficult to find a UN staff member who is there to help these vulnerable people more than he/she worries and thinks about the next promotion, next holiday and thinking about ways on how to receive higher salary. Secondly, they forgot that they are humanitarian workers and their main purpose is to help and find durable solutions for these refugees and end their sufferings. But they instead run the camps like their own businesses and think about ways to get more funds.

V. SHELTERS AND FOOD RATION OF THE REFUGEES IN DJIBOUTI

There are three different refugee camps in Djibouti. Ali Addeh and Holl-Holl refugee camps host Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees and the Yemeni refugees reside at Markazi refugee camp in Obock city. The shelters of these refugees in these camps are entirely made up of traditional nomadic Somali houses, some tents and small containers. These refugees have been living in these shelters for about almost 28 years. In some cases, it will be seen an entire family sharing one tent together, cooking food either inside or outside that tent while their children are playing in front of the tent.

Most of the Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees who live in Ali Addeh and Holl-Holl refugee camps live in some traditional nomadic Somali houses. These nomadic houses are made from “plastic sheets, fabrics, dry grass and palm tree leaves. The most common flooring is soil”.⁴³ On the other hand, the Yemeni refugees reside at Markazi refugee camp which is located in Obock city. In summer, Obock’s temperature reach up to 50 degrees and more with strong winds from May to July. With that kind of heat, the refugee camp does not have air-conditions neither fans. These small containers that the UNHCR provided for the refugees at the Markazi camp are not even supposed to be used in such temperature like Obock.

The effort of UNHCR to solve the refugee crisis after World War II was somewhat outstanding. UNHCR provided better housing and education to those refugees in Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany. UNHCR built “simple brick houses”, gave financial support to the refugees to buy household items

⁴⁰ UN (2015). “History of the UN”, <https://www.un.org/un70/en/content/history>

⁴¹ UNHCR (2014c). “Protecting Refugees & the Role of the UNHCR”, p.14, <http://www.unhcr.org/509a836e9.pdf>

⁴² UNHCR (2018). “Figures at a Glance”, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

⁴³ WFP (2013). “Food Security, Livelihoods and Markets Report for Ali Addeh and Holl-Holl–Djibouti Refugees and Host Community”, p.25, <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp280817.pdf>

and gave “vocational training” to the young refugees so that they would find employment.⁴⁴ So comparing these brick houses for the refugees in Europe in 1955 to the refugees in Djibouti who are living in the traditional nomadic houses, tents and small containers inside the camps for almost 28 years, one might come to the conclusion that UNHCR has different rules when it comes to European and African refugees.

According to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 25 (1): “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing”.⁴⁵ But for the refugees who are struggling in Djibouti for the past 28 years, this article does not make any sense for them the reason being that some of them have been living under the same conditions since 1991. The food rationing that the refugees receive from WFP specially those refugees who live at the Ali Addeh and Holl-Holl camps do not last more than one or two weeks. Food shortage is a big problem that all of the refugees in the camps have in common. A father of four (2016), who had given an interview at Ali Addeh camp said, “we receive flour and few other items which do not last more than a week. My mom brought me here in 1991 and now I am a father of four who is not allowed to work legally to support his family. I always have to borrow food from the shop for my children and in order to pay back the shop; I have to work as a bus boy in the city illegally”.⁴⁶

Ibrahim (2016), who is living alone in the camp said, “I receive 9kg wheat flour, 05kg of sugar, (sometimes 0.15 kg of salt), 1 liter of oil and 500 Djiboutian Francs (FDJ). How could you expect anyone to live a whole month with that. Everyone who lives in this country knows what 500 Djiboutian Francs (FDJ) can buy, and UNHCR expects us to live a whole month with that. I know that life is not fair, but what these NGO’s are doing to us is also not fair. Sometimes when I cannot find anything to eat and I cannot avoid buying food, I go to the Djiboutian military who stay near the camp and eat with them. I cannot thank them enough, without them; I do not know how I could have survived”.⁴⁷

In addition, WFP confirms the amount of food and cash ration that the refugees described: “The WFP monthly food and cash ration comprises of 9 kg of wheat flour, 1 kg of pulses per person, 1 liter of cooking oil, 0.5 kg of sugar and 0.15 kg of salt, in addition to 500 Djiboutian Francs (FDJ) to supplement the diet through the buying of vegetables and other fresh foods”.⁴⁸

VI. EDUCATION OF THE REFUGEE CHILDREN

According to Article 22 (1) of the Geneva Convention; “the Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education”.⁴⁹ The refugee children who are in Djibouti do not attend the same school with the local children and there are separate schools for them inside the camps. The quality of both the education these refugee children receive and their classrooms are not up to standard. These refugee schools inside the camps follow different curriculum and the government of Djibouti do not recognize it. After these children finish school, which ends at grade 11, they cannot get a job with the certificate they get from the refugee school and because of this many refugee children quit school.

Furthermore, besides the unrecognized certificate, these refugee children do not get the kind of support that they needed. An Eritrean student (2016), who was living at the Ali Addeh camp and did not want to share his name, said: “We don’t have clean water, good food, clothes, shoes, school materials and a place to play. On top of that we do not receive even grade eight certificates, so how do you expect us to study”.⁵⁰ Another Somali girl who was at the refugee school at Ali Addeh explained the reason why many students drop out from school and their life as a student. She said, “I collect fire wood and fetch water for my family; you cannot call a shelter

⁴⁴ Kirchhof, A. (2006). “50 years on in Germany, Eastern Europe’s displaced still remember” UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2006/1/43bd42cb4/50-years-germany-eastern-europes-displaced-still-remember-unhcr.html>

⁴⁵ UN (2010). “United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948”, <http://www.jus.uio.no/lm/un.universal.declaration.of.human.rights.1948/portrait.a4.pdf>

⁴⁶ Abdillahi, M. A. (2018). *The Refugee Crisis in Djibouti and the Role of the United Nations*, Unpublished MSc Thesis, Social Sciences Institute, Istanbul Aydin University, p.46

⁴⁷ Abdillahi, p.46

⁴⁸ Tomas, M. (2018). “Yemeni refugee describe the difference that food and cash is making. WFP”, <https://insight.wfp.org/finding-a-sense-of-normality-far-from-home-61f6bb176721>

⁴⁹ UNHCR (2010). “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”, p.24, <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.pdf>

⁵⁰ Abdillahi, p.47

at this place that we live in, on top of that, insufficient food, water, clothes, without learning materials and not receiving a certificate after all of that is causing dismoral that is forcing us to drop out of school”.⁵¹

In December 2017, the eight member countries of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) which is a regional organization and Djibouti is also member of agreed to integrate refugees in to national education systems. This move will allow refugee students to get a certificate which is recognized throughout the region.⁵² This is a great news for the grade one refugee students but not so great for those who graduated from the refugee schools or are still studying as this new system starts from grade one.

VII. DJIBOUTI PEOPLE AND GOVERNMENT IN REFUGEE ISSUE

There are good and bad people in every country in the world, and the same go for the people Djibouti. The overall treatment refugees get from the Djiboutian citizens is good. Before 1991 when the refugee camps were not established and the government still did not recognize the Somali refugees, the people of Djibouti were helping the refugees and giving them as much as they could.

The majority of the refugees in Djibouti have many good things to say about the government and its people, on the other hand only few of them had mix feelings about them. Ibrahim (2016), who was at one of the camps said: “The government and the people of this country treat us well. People from this town even gave me these clothes that I am wearing”.⁵³ Another named Abdirahman (2016) said: “the people of this country are good. They treat refugees in a good way and that is why we stayed here for the past 25 year”.⁵⁴ Farah (2016) describing his experience with the people in Djibouti said, “Djiboutian people are kind and they treat us in a humanitarian way, sometimes there can be some problematic individuals but the majority are good”.⁵⁵

Ahmed (2016), who lives in one of the camps said, “most of the time, we do not face any problems from the people of this country. However, sometimes they treat us as if we are less than they are and if we get in to a fight with a Djiboutian citizen; we face many problems even from the authorities. The food that we receive from WFP is not enough, at the same time we are not allowed to work. Moreover, if we go to the city, we get deported to the Ethiopia border with our refugee cards, than Ethiopia brings us back to the Djibouti border”.⁵⁶ Another refugee (2016), who wanted to remain anonymous said, “of course, human beings are not all the same. There are many good people in this country but sometimes if a refugee person fights with a Djibouti citizen, the refugee person will face many problems and if we are both taken to the police station, the Djiboutian citizen is released in a second”.⁵⁷

As mentioned above, the country has three different refugee camps. In 2017, refugees in Djibouti were integrated in to national systems like education, labor market and health after new National Refugee Laws were introduced. Overall, the majority of the refugees that are in Djibouti have many good things to say about the people and government of Djibouti. They are happy with the way they are treated and welcomed.

Survey is conducted on the refugees in Djibouti based on the questions given below and the evaluation of the survey results are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. The survey has been applied on 150 refugees who are residing at Ali Addeh and Markazi refugee camps in Djibouti. 15,836 refugees reside at Ali Addeh refugee camp while Markazi camp houses 1,233 refugees.⁵⁸ 73 students, 48 women and 29 men participated in this survey. The ages of the students are between 14 to 17 and the age of the adults vary between 18 to 65. The participants of this survey were 71 Somali refugees, 36 Ethiopian refugees, 18 Eritrean refugees and 25 Yemenis.

VIII. FIELD OBSERVATION

Visiting a refugee camp is always a life changing experience for everyone. This is because seeing the situation of those vulnerable and helpless people is very difficult and heartbreaking. As mentioned earlier, the shelters, food and education of the refugees in Djibouti are not up to standard. Most of the shelters in Ali Addeh and Hol-Hol camps are made up of from plastic sheets, fabrics and dry grass while the refugees at the Markezi camp in Obock use small containers and tents as a shelter.

⁵¹ Abdillahi, p.47-48

⁵² Wachiaya, C. (2017). “UN refugee chief praises Djibouti new refugee laws”, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2017/12/5a3416654/un-refugee-chief-praises-djibouti-new-refugee-laws.html>

⁵³ Abdillahi, p.55

⁵⁴ Abdillahi, p.55

⁵⁵ Abdillahi, p.56

⁵⁶ Abdillahi, p.56

⁵⁷ Abdillahi, p.56

⁵⁸ Panaligan, p.1

Comparing the good treatment that the European refugees in 1951 got from the UNHCR which is building “brick houses” for the refugees in “West Germany” in 1951 within few years of their arrival,⁵⁹ to the refugees who are living inside the Djibouti refugee camps for almost 28 years and using fabrics, plastic sheets and dry grass for shelter shows the unfairness and double standard of UNHCR. Not only refugees in Djibouti suffer from this kind of problems, but refugees all throughout the African continent.

The Markezi camp in Obock which the Yemeni refugees reside has better shelters comparing to the other two camps that the Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees reside. Of course the small containers in Obock are very hot during summer and not comfortable to live in but it’s still better than the shelters that the refugees in Ali Addeh and Hol-Hol camps have been using as a shelter for the past 27 years.

In addition, there is a difference between the refugee children’s education in the camps. As mentioned earlier, the refugee children at Ali Addeh and Hol-Hol camps whom are from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea attend refugee schools inside their camps, which they do not even receive certificates after they finish. On the other hand, the refugee children at Markazi camp in Obock whom are from Yemen were attending a school built and funded by Kuwait with the local children. There was a bus taking them to school and then bringing them back to the camp and they were given meal at the school. Furthermore, after they finish school, they were receiving a certificate which is recognized by the government of Djibouti.

Seeing the parents of the Yemeni refugee children to refuse to send their children to the school was a little bit shocking. The refugee parents requested from the LWF staff to arrange a meeting with UNICEF. In this meeting, these refugee parents were saying that LWF boarded their children in the school bus in that morning and took them to school even though they already told them that their children will not attend that school anymore. Their main reason was that they are not okay with some of the teachers in that school because of their nationalities, and that they do not want them teaching their children. These parents requested UNICEF to make a school inside their camp and select teachers among the Yemeni refugees.

The Yemeni refugee children’s education is better than the education of the Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrea refugee children. While in Ali Addeh refugee camp, a Somali refugee mother was asked the reason she does not send her children to school. She said: “The food that we are given is not enough and my children go to school without breakfast and sometimes we do not eat lunch, so how do you expect a hungry child to go to school and study. On top of that, after my children finish grade 11, they will not get a certificate which the government of this country or any other country in the region recognizes”.⁶⁰

These refugees are staying at the same country and their camps are only few kilometers far from each other, but they are getting different treatments. Their shelters are different, the education of their children is different, even how the United Nations and NGO staff members were treating them were different. Even inside Africa, it was clear to see the different treatment and the extra attention that the non African refugees were receiving.

IX. CONCLUSION

The international community, the United Nations, and its refugee agency (UNHCR) have failed to do something concrete for the refugees in Djibouti and some other parts of the world. and they are not honest or serious enough about their work in helping these refugees, and as a result, these refugees are struggling for the past 28 years. In order to improve the lives of these refugees, UNHCR must implement its programs correctly and see them as human beings who need help instead of seeing them as a burden. Its time that UNHCR and similar organizations and their staff members wake up and remember that refugees are the only reason they go to work and have jobs and should know their worth. Better living conditions like better shelters, food, clean water, education, work permit and a good health care would make a big difference in their lives while they wait for either resettlement or voluntary repatriation.

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⁵⁹ Kirchhof, 2006

⁶⁰ Abdillahi, p.57

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Mohamed Ahmed Abdillahi. " The Refugee Crisis in Djibouti and the Role of the United Nations. " IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 23 no. 12, 2018, pp. 43-54.